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ALYN WILLIAMS



FROM A MINIATURE
BY ALYN WILLIAMS

THE TRUTH LOVINGLY TOLD. ALYN WILLIAMS MINIATURE PAINTER

IN the life of Mr. Alyn Williams, founder and originator of the Society of Miniature Painters, there are but few circumstances the details of which would, even if told by the most expert word painter, 'point a moral or adorn a tale.' Almost his first introduction to art was when he became a scholar and studied at Heatherleys, at the Slade, and at Westminster. In these schools he made sufficient progress and developed talent for art to fit him for more extended studies in Paris, where for some time he worked in the Academy Julian.

The beautiful art of miniature painting did not attract him until about the year 1890, when his first work—a miniature portrait of Miss Constance Yarrow—was exhibited in the Royal Academy.

This may be considered the turning point in his career. He was so sensible of the beauty of the art, its delicacy and poetic value, that from

that time he devoted the whole force of an enthusiastic nature to its study.

The subtle and delicate work of the most celebrated French and English miniature painters conveyed valuable lessons in technique and methods; the early French miniatures and those by Cooper, Cosway, Engleheart, and Richmond, possessed a peculiar fascination, the secret of which he not only strove to learn but has never forgotten. It may be owing to this fact that all his miniatures have that quality of expression too seldom found in work of the present day.

The one—and that beyond doubt the most important—thing which photography has always failed to portray is facial expression, and although it must be said with reluctance and hesitation, it is nevertheless a fact that few miniatures now being painted and shown in the exhibitions are really good likenesses. This is generally owing

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to the total absence of expression. The artists have either failed to catch it from the sitter or have been unable to give it in the small space available.

However perfect the work may be in all other respects, if it fails to show expression and play of countenance it fails in its most necessary requirement, and unless the artists now at work on this class of portraiture will study to give perfect individuality to their portraits they will never realise the artistic value of the work of their predecessors in the art. Without wishing to fulsomely bepraise Mr. Alyn Williams, we must say that he has acquired to a great extent the art of giving expression in his miniature portraits, and realises both the value of likeness and character.

In the autumn of the year 1894 he originated and ultimately realised the idea of forming the 'Society of Miniature Painters,' intended to give a stimulus to and revive the practice of the

art he so much loved and admired. Until this date there was not any combination or association entirely and exclusively devoted to the purpose, and to give it 'a local habitation and a name' and a permanent status was Mr. Alyn Williams' intention.

To this end he sketched out the principles on which the Society should be established. These intended rules provided that membership in the Society should be confined entirely to professional artists and be governed by a council to be elected bi-annually from the members by ballot. He derived great assistance from Mr. Quinnell, the subject being often at that time discussed with that gentleman and others at the Brook Green Studios. From that time onwards he steadily worked at his scheme, found out how artist societies were organised and obtained the valuable assistance and advice of Mr. Hal Hurst and other prominent artists. After several meetings, when the project was thoroughly discussed and



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approved, the Society was formally founded, and on the 7th May, 1896, the nucleus was converted into a realised fact, for on this day the first formal meeting of the intended Society was held at No. 7, Holland Park Road, when the by-laws, previously prepared, were read to the meeting and adopted, and the office bearers and council were elected to act until the next annual general meeting, to be held early in the following year, and a number of members elected, at this time the Society being limited to fifty members.

At this meeting Mr. Alyn Williams was proposed as President, and unanimously elected, and with his usual activity and perseverance he set about to find a suitable gallery for the annual exhibitions of the works of the members, and was fortunate enough to secure the use of the Modern Gallery in New Bond Street, and the services of Mr. Edward Freeman, the owner of the gallery, and one of the most skilled and experienced of those who deal with works of art,

as Secretary of the Society. The Bond Street Gallery is large and affords ample space, which during the Society's Exhibition is restricted to the exhibition of miniature subject pictures and portraits, which can be so placed and spaced as to show to advantage the beauties of the individual exhibits.

Miniature portraits in the Royal Academy and other large exhibitions are very frequently overlooked both by the Press and the public, and are always surrounded by so many large paintings that the natural refocusing of the eye is very greatly to the prejudice of miniature work, and the general cause of the Academy headache.

The inaugural exhibition of the works of the members of the Society of Miniature Painters was held at the Bond Street Gallery in September, 1896, and proved a great success, there being 482 exhibits, and afforded much satisfaction to the members, and the annual exhibitions of the Society in 1897 and 1898 met with equal

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success, and were visited by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, H.R.H. the Duchess of York, and other members of the Royal Family. At the close of the inaugural exhibition Her Majesty the Queen graciously consented to a selection of the works being submitted to Her Majesty. These were also submitted to H.R.H. Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne, who honoured the Society by becoming an honorary member.

At a special general meeting in 1897, so many artists being anxious to become members, and the original limit of fifty being attained, it was resolved to increase the number of members to 100.

The fullest meeting of the Society was at the annual general meeting in January, 1899, when Mr. Williams was able to announce that Sir William Richmond, K.C.B., R.A., had consented to become their President. Mr. Williams retired, and was with Mr. Hurst elected a Vice-President. To show the growth of the Society and the support it receives from the

miniature painters, it may be mentioned that the limit of 100 has been filled, and still there are numerous applications for membership, and the President of the Royal Academy and the Presidents of the seven Royal Fine Art Societies are honorary members.

Arrangements have been made whereby each member can have on view three representative miniatures throughout the year, and a secretary to facilitate interviews between artists and clients.

It is intended to make a special feature at the exhibitions of miniature subject pictures as well as portraits. This, it is believed, will make the Society's Exhibitions still more popular with the general public. The Society also admits the works of non-members, if submitted and deemed to have sufficient merit.

Mr. Alyn Williams is certainly to be congratulated on the success which has attended his five years' efforts to give to the entire body of miniature painters everything they could desire or require to promote their art; and by these

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means the art of miniature painting is certainly being resuscitated.

As an artist, Mr. Alyn Williams' portraits have gained him a large and valuable connection. As a master he has always been a great advocate for his pupils studying the works of old portrait painters, always to be on the alert to watch and catch the changing expression of the sitter's countenance, never to be led away by photographs, but always to draw and paint from the model. He advises every student in the first instance to paint large full life-size portraits. Those who draw with a large brush and broad free hand will find the full advantage when painting miniature work, for surely those who only confine their studies and practice to miniature work can seldom acquire the truthful rendering of the likeness, which should be the chief end and aim to be attained. The technique necessary to be acquired is delicate and refined, the coarse and somewhat catchy patterns of a Christmas card should be avoided and never undertaken, as it destroys all taste and sense of refined feeling, accuracy of design, sense of true

colour and values. There is no excuse for a miniature painted on ivory not having all the artistic value of the life-size picture on canvas; as a proof of this the portrait in the South Kensington Museum of an old gentleman painted on ivory, by John Commerford, may be considered perhaps the finest miniature ever painted.

There is great danger to the durability of painting on ivory if it has been chemically bleached, as the process is by using peroxide of hydrogen, for the paint is sure to fly, and the work, after the lapse of a short time, be utterly spoilt, but this does not apply to ivory bleached in the sun; though the risk of using the wrong sort should be avoided.

Mr. Alyn Williams has been elected an Associate of the Royal Cambrian Academy of Art, and is this year again exhibiting miniatures in the Royal Academy, Paris Salon, and elsewhere, an almost phenomenal success for so young a man, and it is very pleasing to find that the commissions he now has will keep him at work in his flower garden studio in the Holland Villas Road.

T. R. REEVE.



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